I Fasten a Bracelet

A New Yorker's Odd Adventures With a "Badge of Slavery"

By David Potter

CHAPTER I.

Nell Pours Coffee.

"MISS ELLEN won't be down to breakfast, sir," said Theresa, humbly enough.

"Ask her to come at once," I commanded.

The maid hurriedly withdrew. I turned to the window and gazed out across the valley to the rolling Berkshires. The mist of the autumn morning still hid the Westbrook place on the opposite slope and the gravelled walks in front of Red Cedars were a little cracked by the frost.

"If you please, sir," said the maid behind me, "Miss Ellen begs you to excuse her. Mrs. Sutphen will be down at once to pour coffee, sir."

I faced her abruptly. "Tell Mrs. Sutphen Miss Ellen and I will breakfast without her," I said with emphasis. "Say to Miss Sutphen I wish her to come immediately. Say I order her to come—order her, do you understand? And you needn't come back—we'll wait on ourselves."

For a moment Theresa's eyes met mine defiantly.

"Miss Ellen says she"——

"That will do," I interrupted. "Carry my orders at once. And look here, Theresa! Don't think I don't see through you. You'd better not get in my way about here. I know very well you're as deep in this game as any one."

At my chance shot the girl's stubbornness vanished. She fled from the room.

Again I strolled to the window and gazed across the valley, yet I had to pinch myself to realize that I was not dreaming.

This was Bannocks, there swelled the yellowing Berkshires, and it was the year of grace nineteen hundred and ten. These things were real. It was equally certain that I stood in the breakfast room of Red Cedars, master not only of the house, but also of Mrs. Constance Sutphen and, above all, of the much admired Ellen Sutphen. I was master and determined to take advantage of my mastery—no matter how ungenerously.

There was a light step in the hallway. I faced about as Ellen Sutphen entered. Without lifting her eyes to meet my glance, she crossed the room and sank into her seat behind the coffee urn.

"Good morning," I said.

She made no answer.

"Perhaps you didn't notice that I bade you good-morning, mademoiselle."

Her long lashes were lifted at last—scorn and protest showed in the eyes that met mine an instant.

"Good-morning," she said faintly. Again the lashes swept the white cheeks.

"That's right," I said. "Very well done, indeed. And now that the Sphinx has spoken, I want you to talk naturally, Nell. No sulking, you know. Play the game."

"It's a poor game for us, Mr. Schuyler."

"Craig," I corrected.

"Craig." Her voice was hardly audible.

"Good. Don't let's forget all the past. Will you pour me some coffee? Thank you."

I watched her without speaking until she had handed me my cup—her eyes did not meet mine.

"Yes," I went on, "I want you not only to be natural, but I want you to be good-humored."

"Good-humored?" she protested.

"You must be reasonable." I rested an elbow on the table, and assumed a manner of frank argument. "When one owns a girl, body and soul, he has a right to expect her to behave decently, hasn't he?"

She raised her head with something of her old hauteur—the chin a little forward, the hazel eyes steady, the neck drawn proudly back. It was the famous "Sutphen look."

"Own me!" she said. "No—never."

"You'll obey me as long as I like, mind! Laugh when I order you to, and cry, if I prefer it! Will you?"

"Yes—if I must." Her lip barely framed the words.

"Oh, you must," I said. "There isn't any way out of it for you, really. I don't mind saying I'm enjoying the situation, Nell. I've waited a good while for my turn—I dare say you don't blame me for making good use of it now that it's come."

She had changed much during the four years I had been absent from the country. Her figure was not quite the same as that which had haunted my dreams by a hundred campfires, yet it was fully as beautiful—more rounded, if not so willowy; more graceful if not so ethereal.

Her face looked older. A look of unutterable care stamped the whole face. The slumberous glance of the eyes was gone and in its place was an anxious questioning.

"Why so silent?" I said aloud. "I'm ready to have you sparkle a little, if you please."

"Only a Nero could fiddle while Rome was burning," she returned.

"Joan of Arc laughed when they set fire to the fagots that burned her."

"But I'm not a Joan of Arc—I wish I were."

"You mean you'd find a way to oust the enemy?"

"Yes."

"Who have been your friends since I went over the horizon? Your men friends I mean, of course."

"I haven't had any—not the sort you mean. Tom Bullit and Harold Winston have been here occasionally and—and"——

"And who?"

"And Aleck Westbrook." She smiled faintly. "He's too young to count, though."

"A nice boy," I commented. "At any rate he promised to be when I last saw him. Is that all?"

"Ye-es, I think so."

"Not quite," I said. "I've read the newspapers, if I have been in Sumatra. Haven't you left out somebody, Nell?"

This time the color in her cheeks grew to a real blush.

"Well, Carlos Beauchamp was over last year."

"Carlos Beauchamp?" I repeated. It was only what I had expected to hear, yet I liked it none the more for that. I eyed her with an insolence that might well have reminded her of the gentleman in question.

"There's an acquaintance you're better without," I said.

"As your cousin."

"Certainly—and my opinion prevails here. Please understand you're through with him," I concluded rather savagely.

I handed her the morning paper, my finger on a passage that had attracted my attention. She read it aloud—her voice was always soft and low—an English voice:

"Among the notable arrivals on the Lusitania yesterday morning were Count Nakimura, the Japanese General; Mr Carlos Beau"—her voice faltered an instant—"Beauchamp of London and Havana, and Mr. Craig Schuyler of New York. Mr. Schuyler's presence will be particularly welcomed by his friends in this city, his long absence abroad having given rise to the rumor that he had intended to become a regular expatriate. As has been several times stated in these columns, Mr. Schuyler has been engaged in extensive travel and exploration in the Far East. It is said he has penetrated parts of Sumatra never before reached by a white man, and that he has participated in some of the battles between the Achinese and the Dutch. We have the best authority for stating that there is no truth in the rumor extensively circulated in New York and Newport some months since, to the effect that Mr. Schuyler's prolonged stay in Sumatra has been due to the fascinations of a certain native princess. One who is close to Mr. Schuyler positively denies any knowledge of such a state of affairs."

"Good for Dirck!" I exclaimed.

She laid down the paper. "Who is Dirck?"

"Dirck DuBois, my man-of-all-talents—my hunter in Sumatra, just at present my chauffeur, and I'm not ashamed to call him my friend. He drove the car up last night. Probably you didn't know how I got here—in the excitement."

"You won't want me any more today, will you, Craig? My services can be dispensed with? I have a headache."

"I see. Then I won't want you today, but I will to-night, at dinner."

"At dinner?"

"Yes—and have some people in, if you will. It needn't be many—about three couples will be enough, don't you think?"

"Three too many! A formal dinner—here—to-night!"

I affected to misunderstand her exclamation. "Oh, nothing formal. It's too short notice for that, isn't it? If you'll write the notes I'll just send Dirck around in the car—that'll be easy enough. If it's too sudden to suit any one, he or she can decline, and we can try the next one. One can always pick up a spare man or girl somewhere."

"Craig!" she cried, almost in a wail, "you can't mean it! You can't be in earnest!"

"What? Certainly I am—why not? A very suitable occasion for a little impromptu dinner, isn't it? It will probably be in the papers to-morrow: 'a welcome to the distinguished explorer, Mr. Craig Schuyler' and all that—a 'recherche little affair given by his hostesses, Mrs. Sutphen and her charming daughter.' I can fancy how it will run: 'It will be remembered that, before his abrupt departure from America some four years ago, Miss Sutphen and Mr. Schuyler'—and so forth, and so forth."

She stretched both hands toward me in a sudden gesture, imploring and passionate.

"Craig! Think! How can we sit at dinner—laugh and smile and talk, as if nothing had happened?"

"Nothing has happened," I rejoined—"that is, so far as they're concerned—outsiders, I mean. They don't know anything, and I promise you they won't learn anything from what I'll say or do. You needn't be afraid of that."

"Please, Craig, don't make me," she repeated.

"Really," I said, "I thought I'd made my position clear. We arranged it all last night, didn't we? What's the use of fighting the battle over again! Don't let's have a scene, Nell—leave all that to your mother. As she remarked last night, my conduct isn't generous, certainly—not even gentlemanly, perhaps—in fact, I believe she said I was on out-and-out bounder. That wasn't a very judicious remark for a lady in her awkward position, by the way. But let it go—I admit I'm playing the bounder—and I don't care. I don't want to be brutal—at least not any more brutal than necessary—but I've got you both in the hollow of my hand, and I don't intend to let you go—not easily. I'm perfectly willing to answer to your brother whenever he comes—I suppose you've sent for him, haven't you?"

"Ned? No!"

"You haven't had a chance? Well, I'll argue my conduct with Ned if he should turn up. In the mean while I want the dinner to come off. I want the pleasure of sitting at your table and feeling that it's really mine. That's my whim, and I'll gratify whatever whim I please just now."

"Please!"

"It's no use," I said. "I'll ask you to write the notes at once. Let's see whom shall we ask? Aleck Westbrook and his sister are two—I'd almost forgotten poor Rex had a sister—she must be quite grown-up. Are the Willy Astors here?"

She nodded miserably.

"That'll make four. And John and Augusta Savarton—I saw by the papers they were here. There's our six. Yes, and old General Savarton for your mother. Do you think of anyone better? I'll go in to dinner with you, if you'll allow me the honor."

She spoke with difficulty, her face very white. "I can see you've something back of this, Craig, you didn't use to sneer so terribly!"

"I didn't have cause."

"Surely you don't mean to tell them—everything—to-night."

"Heaven forbid! I promise you I'll behave decently in that direction. It would be no satisfaction to me to have them know. I'll be more than polite—more than respectful—never fear!"

"What do you mean?"

"Wait and see," I said airily.

CHAPTER II.

A Girl Disobeys Orders.

I ROUSED myself from the comfortable chair in the library. I had been reading and musing a good hour since breakfast. Then I looked out of the window.

Dirck Du Bois was polishing my car, humming as he worked. He was a man of twenty-eight or thirty, deep chested and stocky. He had been in more than one tight place with me, and had the courage of one of Napoleon's grenadiers.

While he wrestled with an erring carbureter, Theresa, the waitress, stood as close to him as the imminent danger of soiling her white apron would permit. Her eyes watched him admiringly, and her clever little tongue plied him with flattery.

"You're awful smart to do all that, Mr. Du Bois. You handle all those—those things like I would a needle."

Dirck was halfway under the car by this time and only grunted pleasantly in acknowledgment of her compliment.

The maid smoothed her apron. "Have you always been with Mr. Schuyler, Mr. Du Bois?"

"Not always. I was born, perhaps, two years before monsieur. He failed to employ me during those years—such thoughtlessness is not like monsieur." The fellow never moved a muscle of his face.

Theresa dropped her voice insinuatingly and smoothed her apron afresh. "Is it true what they say of him, Mr. Du Bois? Is he married to one of those savages out there?"

"Ma'am'selle," he said solemnly, "will you promise never to tell as long as you live?"

"Oh, yes," said Theresa eagerly.

Dirck looked about with a great air of caution. "Well, then, monsieur had seven wives."

"Seven!"

"Yes, ma'am'selle—all at the same time."

"Oh, my!"

"I assure you. And every evening they dined with him, extremely decollete."

"Oh, Mr. Du Bois!"

"It is quite true." His face assumed an expression of pleased recollection. "They were a lovely sight, ma'am'selle. First one would see their seven smooth necks"——

But Theresa waited to hear no more. With a horrified giggle she snatched up her skirt and ran for it.

Dirck stared after her open-mouthed. I declare the man did not even smile, until I hailed him.

"Good morning, Dirck! That's a frightful reputation you've been giving me. Theresa will think I'm a real Bluebeard."

He faced about and touched his cap, his eyes twinkling, his lips on a broad grin.

"Good morning, monsieur. That little girl wants to know more than is good for her, perhaps. I gave you as many wives as a Solomon."

"You're a cynic, Dirck."

"I have been three years with monsieur."

"You have me there. Well, we've been here ten hours or so—how do you like the place so far?"

"The chef is French, the butler is English, one of the maids is Irish, and the other is Theresa. I am satisfied."

"I'm glad of it. I may stay here some time."

"As monsieur pleases."

"By the way, I think Miss Sutphen and I will take a turn in the hills, after you've delivered some notes she's writing."

"Yes, monsieur. Theresa brought them to me just now." He touched the pocket of his leather coat. "Where shall I meet monsieur and mademoiselle? Mademoiselle Sutphen went out nearly an hour ago, as monsieur knows."

"Eh! What?" I exclaimed. "She went out?" I checked myself. "Oh, of course, I'd forgotten. Yes, about an hour ago. Which way did she go?"

"Mademoiselle went as if for a walk—up the hill, I think. I hardly noticed."

"Well," I said, "deliver the notes as soon as you can." I was about to turn from the window. "Oh, by the way, Dirck, come to my room to-night—after dinner some time. I've a little business to talk over with you."

"Yes, monsieur. At 12 o'clock?"

"Thereabouts. Up the hill, you said?"

"Yes, monsieur."

Ellen had left the house without my knowledge. She had disobeyed me in this little matter; she might do so in a greater—it was necessary to call a halt at once. I would find her and punish her forthwith in a way she could not forget.

In my dressing room I speedily got myself into my favorite walking togs—laced half-boots, flexible and fitting like a glove—a design of my own; army khaki trousers, not too tight, a loose coat cut very short, and a soft hat. I had tramped many a mile through the dank Sumatran jungle in that rig.

From the bottom of my dressing case I drew a certain African curio. It was a bracelet of iron, not very thick but nearly two inches broad. Being native wrought, the quality of the work was so crude that the ore had retained almost its original color—a dark red. It was quite plain in design, except where it clasped or rather locked, for the thing was secured by a regular key of considerable size.

The lock was the most curious part of the bracelet. It was shaped into the face of a Nubian. The face, expressive of a thousand years of uncomplaining submission, looked up at one as if momentarily expecting to feel the sting of the lash or the blow of the slave-driver's fist. The native smith who had wrought that face must himself have marched many a weary mile yoked in the slave caravan.

I dropped bracelet and key into my coat pocket. Then I picked up my gloves, found a stick, and sallied out of the house.

At a sheer venture I struck into the road that wound up the hill. I had gone only a few rods when a slim, blond girl on horseback appeared around the curve, followed by a groom.

I lifted my hat as she trotted past. She returned the bow, but so distantly that I knew she had not recognized me. Small wonder! I had not seen Norah Westbrook for nearly four years, and my face, burned by tropic suns, was well-nigh as dark as a Malay's.

I had given Norah toys when she was a baby, and candy as she grew into a schoolgirl. Her older brother, Rex, had been one of my dearest friends. Poor fellow! typhoid fever had taken him off for years before—not long before my last interview with the Sutphens, that interview which had driven me wandering.

It was one thing for me to start out at a venture to find my runaway, but it was quite another to have that venture bring any satisfactory result. That afternoon I found Berkshire Township uncomfortably large.

I came to a point where a sizable river brawled down a gorge whose sides flamed in autumn colors. It was a neighborhood wholly new to me—I was rather at a loss to determine in what direction Bannocks and "Red Cedars" lay.

At the highest point of the road that skirted the valley, a cottage peeped from an apple orchard. No doubt its occupant would be able to point out my homeward course.

Over the gate swung a little sign, neatly painted in white letters on a blackboard:

FRESH APPLE PIE
WITH CREAM
SOLD HERE.

The sight of this legend cheered me immensely. I would be certain to find a person of some intelligence in the house—a farmer's wife or daughter—who would know where and how far off Bannocks lay; and furthermore, I promised myself a goodly slice of home made pie, "with cream," to sustain me on my homeward tramp.

With this pleasing prospect in my mind's eye I turned through the gateway, mounted the steps, and knocked at the cottage door.

Silence followed my knock. Then arose a skurry of feet within, and sounds that might have been hurried whispers.

The door opened and a girl stood before me. She was not the usual type of country lass, round cheeked plump and rosy. On the contrary, she was thin and rather pale, and her eyes, large and soft, had dark shadows beneath them. She wore a plain muslin gown, but I noticed it was freshly starched. Her hair lay in neat coils about her head.

"Good afternoon," I said.

She spoke in a confusion that accorded with her frightened eyes. "Good afternoon—sir."

"I see you sell apple pies," I said. "I haven't eaten one since I was a boy, and I feel I need one immediately. Will you——"

"Oh, apple pie!" interrupted the girl in what was almost an exclamation of relief. "Is that all? Pies? Oh yes, sir. No, sir, I mean. Oh, I mean we're all out of them."

I stepped quietly past her. "There's one you've overlooked," I said. "You mean you haven't baked any for sale, of course. I see there's a fresh one on the table there."

The girl had half extended her arm as if she would have prevented my entrance. She blushed to the eyes at my inquiring glance. I pointed to a delectable concoction on the table of the small room. Its rich brown surface was still smoking from the oven.

"I hope even if you were saving it for your own supper," I went on, "you'll surrender it to me."

To my right a door stood a trifle ajar—through the crack I caught a glimpse of a sort of gallery that seemed to overlook the gorge.

I happened to glance at the girl. She was watching me furtively. A sunbeam made a scarlet gash across her cheek.

I strolled carelessly toward the door ajar. The girl, pretending to devote her whole attention to wrapping the precious pie, could hardly contain her anxiety.

"Do you want anything, sir? You can get a drink of water at the pump in the kitchen."

"I was wondering what you have here," I said, moving toward the inner door. "It looks like a summer garden."

"No, sir. The door doesn't lead anywhere."

"A door that doesn't lead anywhere?" I laughed. "That is unusual, isn't it?"

"Of course—my room," she stammered with increasing agitation. "That's private, sir—you can't go there—oh!" I had pushed the door wide.

Before I could wink a man stepped past me, and crossing the room in two strides, disappeared down a back hall.

On the balcony, the slender figure and white face of Ellen Sutphen confronted me. I had found the fugitive.

CHAPTER III.

I Fasten a Bracelet.

FOR a moment Ellen and I faced each other—neither moved nor spoke. A door slammed at the end of the passageway—her eyes widened.

I motioned toward the door—she started at my gesture. I held the door open and she passed me with lowered head and faintly flushing cheeks. I followed close.

"You needn't mind about the pie," I said to the staring girl. "We won't stop to eat it."

Her glance swept from me to Ellen. "I suppose—you'll be back, Ellen?"

"I—I think not, Mary," answered my captive. "Not to-day."

"I think not, too," I volunteered.

The country girl ignored me. "When can you come?" she asked.

"I—don't know—when." A look of understanding passed between the two women.

It was only when Ellen and I were climbing the rough path up the hill that I remembered I had forgotten to inquire the way home. I spoke to her for the first time that afternoon.

"It's getting rather late. Do you know the road to Bannocks?"

"Yes," she answered in a low tone. "We're going in the right direction. This is a short cut."

I followed her without further remark. Suddenly Ellen whirled about. Her eyes met mine defiantly and her cheeks were scarlet.

"Well," she said, "you haven't asked me his name!"

"His name?" I answered stupidly. "Whose?"

"The man you saw"——

"The man I saw with you in the cottage," I finished. "No, I haven't. What's the use?"

The color began to fade from her cheeks. "You mean—I'd lie to you?"

"No, not at all. I'm not afraid of that—I know you wouldn't lie. You've already committed all the deception you're capable of. I know that."

"But I've just deceived you by coming to Mary Finney's cottage."

Half whimsically I defended the girl against herself. "No, I don't call that deception—it's disobedience, flat disobedience. Not so bad as deception, but bad enough. I told you I didn't want you to leave the house without my permission, but I don't remember that you promised anything."

"No-o-o. Then—you don't know who he is?"

"I haven't the least idea—I never saw him before."

She seemed strangely pertinacious of a subject one might have supposed she would be glad to drop as soon as possible.

"You left the house against my express orders, didn't you?"

"Yes—I did."

"You'll have to be punished for it then."

She gave me a quick glance. "Am I not being punished—every minute?" she said.

"For past offenses, yes. You must have a particular punishment for disobedience. Give me your stick."

She was quite pale by this time. She yielded me a silver-tipped cane with a singular gesture, half imploring, half menacing.

"If—if you"—— Her voice died away. With an effort she began again. "If you strike me with that"——

"Heaven forbid!" I exclaimed. "It hasn't come to that. No, I merely want your left arm free so that I can put my mark on it. A mark you won't soon forget."

"Not—not with the stick?"

"I promise you, no. Hold out your arm."

She obeyed, watching the motions of my fingers as a bird watches the snake that holds it fascinated.

"What are you doing?" she said at last.

I felt in my pocket and drew out the iron bracelet.

"This," I answered, and slipped the trinket on her arm—it was more nearly a handcuff than a bracelet. I locked it with a single turn of the key, and dropped the key into my pocket.

"You can disobey me, but you'll have to wear the badge to pay for it."

"The badge?"

"Yes—of servitude. In Africa they put that thing on slaves."

She looked at the two-inch band of iron that gripped her arm so lightly yet so irrevocably. The submissive, abject face—the face of the Nubian bondsman—gazed up at her from the quaint lock.

I could not see her eyes, but I knew she was watching me through the veiling lashes.

"So a slave has worn this—in Africa?"

"I took it from one myself."

"And a slave is to wear it here?"

"You have the point exactly."

"That's fair."

In spite of myself I felt a thrill of admiration. "By Jove, Nell, you're game!"

She gave me the little ghost of a smile.

"Now," I said, "we must hurry, if we want to reach home in good time, in fact in any time at all. Don't forget you've a dinner on to-night."

"At dinner to-night—how can I explain—this?" She held up her left hand.

"Don't explain it."

"But some one will be sure to ask me where I got it, and what it means. Dot Archer probes into everything, and Augusta is worse, if possible. This—is rather unusual, you know."

"It is unusual," I agreed.

"You don't mean to tell them"——

"No, nothing. If any one inquires about it, say it's a gift from me—that's true. They'll probably take it for Grecian hammered copper—you see its reddish color."

"Yes. It isn't a nasty black like most iron. It is iron, isn't it?"

"Yes—native manufacture. That's why the red shows so plainly. Leave impertinent questioners to me. I'll tell them it's a bit of Egyptian bronze I received as a love-token from the Queen of Sheba. That ought to satisfy the most exacting."

"You aren't as cruel as you might be—Craig."

"Thank you, ma'am—don't count on that, though. I could be worse if I tried. You wear that bracelet for my satisfaction, not for others'—that's all."

By this time we had crossed the upland and were following the path about a hill. The deepening shadows made me glance at my watch.

"It's nearly 6 o'clock. How far are we from Red Cedars?"

"Nearly five miles, I think. We'll be in good time, but we must hurry."

"Are you sure you know the way?" I persisted.

"Perfectly. I've come this path very often"——

She broke off abruptly. The frightened glance she stole at me showed that she was aware she had said too much. I did not fail to take advantage of her slip.

"So you come often to that cottage? Whose is it—Mary Finney's? A charming pie-woman. I've a notion to come this path very often myself."

"Mary is pretty."

"But not the sole attraction, perhaps," I returned airily. "The next time you go to the cottage I think I'll have to get you to take me with you."

"If you like."

"Oh, certainly. But will you like it and will he like it?"

She stopped short.

"What do you mean?"

"It's plain enough. You can't imagine I've forgotten that I found you sitting at a table with a man who ran when he saw me. I don't like a man who runs."

"He didn't run."

"Well, walked, then—in quick time."

"You told me just now you weren't interested in him."

"I thought I wasn't, but he's a hard fact that will obtrude himself. As I say, I don't like cowards."

"He isn't a coward," she flashed. Her defiant mood changed abruptly. She drew a little shuddering breath. "You're right—he is."

We covered a mile or two at a good speed. Then she exclaimed:

"I thought I could stand it—the situation—your position here—but I can't. It's intolerable!"

"Some people who aren't sensitive to dishonor are sensitive to injury."

"Can't you conceive of a person sacrificing himself—yes, herself—for another?—doing a thing she didn't believe in?"

"You mean you sacrificed yourself, of course?"

"If you like."

I laughed shortly. "For your mother, to keep her comfortable, to keep her luxurious—and for yourself, too! Do you call that self-sacrifice? Good Lord, Nell! to live as you live, to keep up Red Cedars this minute—Jordan and Theresa and the rest—to do it by the means you've taken—Good Lord!" I broke off at a loss for words.

"You've never been tried in the way I—we—were," Ellen went on monotonously. "If you'll put yourself in my place a moment, you'll understand. I must tell you"——

"You could have worked," I broke in, "worked as thousands of women do, hundreds of them as well born as yourself."

"I don't understand, Craig."

"I understand enough—too much, I'm afraid. You claim credit for self-sacrifice on account of what you did? Real self-sacrifice would mean that you must be a stenographer, exposed to the familiarities of office routine—or a shopgirl, kowtowing to the floor-walker—or a cloak model, stared at by other women—or a governess, annoyed all day long by spoiled children. You preferred to sacrifice yourself in another and an easier way."

We reached the front door of the "Red Cedars," and then we separated. I dressed for dinner leisurely. My trunks had arrived in the course of the day, and I found my things laid out for me.

When I had finished I contemplated myself in the tall pier glass. I fancied I made a rather formidable figure, which was precisely what I wished to make.

My eyes are naturally deep-sunken, and years of outdoor life had somehow accentuated this characteristic. My mouth was not encouraging to one who knew herself guilty, and my face, darkly tanned, had a certain immobility of expression. Altogether, even had there not been good reason, I did not wonder that Miss Sutphen had shrunk before me from the moment of my re-entrance upon her life.

I was still viewing myself in the glass when I heard a sound at the door of my dressing room. It was not a knock but a slight grating noise—the faintest of faint noises—but I am keen-eared and knew I could not be mistaken. I wheeled about and waited.

The sound was not repeated, but as I stood staring at the door the glass knob turned slowly to the reverse position. Some one had tried to enter and had found the door locked. There was a moment's silence, then a light footstep went stealing up the hall.

In two strides I could have crossed the room, flung open the door, and caught the would-be intruder. But to what end?

I knew as surely as if I held her, shamed and trembling, in my grasp, that it could only be one of two persons—Ellen or Mrs. Sutphen. In my present humor I had no desire to precipitate a scene with either. It was my intention to have the approaching dinner go off smoothly. It would not do to precede it by a stormy interview with my hostesses.

So I refrained from making any effort to seize the person who had stealthily tried my door. But the attempt reminded me that some precautions were advisable.

Accordingly I removed my wallet from the dressing table to the inside pocket of my coat. Its contents were necessary to maintain my position at "Red Cedars"—it would be safest about my person.

These preparations being completed I turned to go downstairs. To reach the door from the dressing table I had to pass in front of the pier glass—I made a mental note of the fact.

I turned back and, passing from the dressing room into the bedroom, lifted a window. The lights from an ell of the house shone up at me. Leaning out, I gave a peculiar whistle two or three times—then waited.

In a moment or two the whistle was answered beneath my window—a man's shadowy form appeared out of the darkness.

"Can you hear me?" I called in Malayan.

"Yes," answered Dirck in the same tongue.

"When you come to my room after dinner bring a pair of pincers and a yard or two of soft wire. Keep them out of sight, under your coat—understand?"

I did not wait for his answer, but closed the window and sought the drawing room.

It was in sole possession of the head of the house—Mrs. Sutphen herself. I had not seen her since late the night before. She was sitting languidly in an arm chair, and inclined her head to me with an attempt at her usual affectionate manner.

She was a small, pussy-cat sort of woman, retrousse-nosed and fair-browed.

Her nod, desperate attempt to appear at ease as I knew it to be, got my nerves on edge at once. I made her a gay bow.

"Good evening. It's awfully good of you to give this dinner. It's in my honor, isn't it? You oughtn't to have tried to amuse me by asking people in—after your nasty bandanna last night. You and Nell are amusement enough for any one. I hope the head's better." My tone and manner were intensely sympathetic.

"Craig, you—are execrable!"

"My dear lady," I answered blandly, "I am expressing my deep interest in your health. Is there anything in my respectful solicitude to cause you to treat me so unkindly?"

"How a man born a gentleman"—— she began.

I interrupted. "For that matter, how a woman born a lady"—— My pause was full of significance to her.

Her foot again tapped the floor while I, smiling politely, awaited her next remark.

We were in this attitude when Ellen entered the room.

I surveyed her. "Nell," I said, "do you mind my saying you are looking exceedingly charming to-night?"

She gave me a little eager smile, as if imploring me not to jeer, but my earnest glance reassured her, and made her lower her eyes as well.

"Won't you sit down, Nell?" I asked. "You must be tired after our tramp."

"Have you been out walking, Ellen?" queried Mrs. Sutphen. "I hope you didn't go too far. These autumn days are so trying."

"It wasn't far." Ellen's reply was evasive. "I met Mr. Schuyler and—we came back together."

"Where did you go?" said her mother with the dull persistence a weak nature often displays.

"Only three or four miles, perhaps."

"But where?"

"It was—only to Mary Finney's." She spoke hesitantly, with a sidelong glance at me, as if begging me to be silent.

I manifested a great interest in a painting on the wall above the piano.

"To Mary Finney's?" repeated Mrs. Sutphen querulously. "That girl! I wish you would pay some attention to my wishes, Ellen." Doubtless on account of our peculiar relations she seemed to be heedless of preserving the amenities before me. "You know I've told you again and again"——

Ellen made a gesture. "Please, mother—not now."

"Why not now?" retorted Mrs. Sutphen, rather raising than lowering her tone. "Craig knows the worst about us, doesn't he? He might as well see our other family skeletons, and"——

"Mother!"

"Please don't interrupt me, I"——

It was useless for me to pretend any longer that I was oblivious of the discussion. I felt a glow of anger at the older woman's bad taste.

"Mrs. Sutphen, I don't care to hear anything that Nell doesn't wish me to hear."

(To Be Continued.)

UNDER COVER

By Robert Minor